Focusing on two twentieth-century Canadian female authors of distinct cultural and linguistic backgrounds, this book addresses the central role they each give to Canadian history. By assessing the ways in which each author attempts to “re-write” Canadian history in order to create a specifically female historical space, Elodie Rousselot shows that both Margaret Atwood and Anne Hébert have successfully given a voice to traditionally oppressed female figures.

Elodie Rousselot’s analysis focuses on Margaret Atwood’s *The Journals of Susanna Moodie and Grace*, an unpublished play, as well as on her novel *Alias Grace*. She also examines Anne Hébert’s novel, *Kamouraska*, and two plays: *La Cage* and *L’Île de la Demoiselle*. Finally, Anne Hébert’s success in establishing a Quebecois “herstory” is assessed through the analysis of her 1988 novel *Le Premier Jardin*.

Dr Elodie Rousselot is a Senior Lecturer in English Literature at the School of Social, Historical and Literary Studies of the University of Portsmouth. Her monograph *Re-Writing Women into Canadian History: Margaret Atwood and Anne Hébert* has been awarded the Prix scientifique Anne-Hébert by the Centre Anne-Hébert, University of Sherbrooke, Québec, Canada.
ELODIE ROUSSELOT

Re-Writing Women into Canadian History: Margaret Atwood and Anne Hébert

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For Mamie

with love
“History is a set of lies agreed upon.”

Napoléon Bonaparte
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Introduction

English- and French-Canadian Literatures: “Two Solitudes”?

This project began with the observation that, recurrently, Anglophone and Francophone Canadian literatures have been perceived as two separate entities, one entity often examined with little or no reference to the other. One notices for instance W.J. Keith’s work *Canadian Literature in English* (2006), in the introduction to which he claims:

> readers (especially, perhaps, non-Canadian readers) are likely to be struck by the absence in the foregoing discussion of any detailed discussion of French-Canadian or Québécois literature. Surely, it will be said, the interrelations between the writing in Canada’s two official languages must have been deep and far-reaching. Unfortunately, this has not been the case. (24)

Keith acknowledges the “few comparative studies [which] have been attempted,” but re-asserts his belief that “[a]t the present time, English- and French-Canadian writing are best discussed separately” (25). Such attitude is well illustrated by the title of Hugh MacLennan’s novel *Two Solitudes* (1945), a reference to poet Rainer Maria Rilke’s phrase, taken out of its original context here to express the state of affairs between English and French Canada in terms of politics, culture, and by extension, literature.¹

¹. See Rainer Maria Rilke’s letter to Mr. Kappus, May 14, 1904: “Love consists in this, that two solitudes protect, and touch, and greet each other” (71). Keith points out, however, that “the narrower conception expressed in [MacLennan’s] title itself
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This attitude seems also to be confirmed in Margaret Atwood’s *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972), in which she essentially examines Anglo-Canadian writing and confines the study of French-Canadian literature to a separate chapter. She observes that for the “French teacher teaching Canadian literature,” there ought to be “a book written in French, describing more of the key patterns in Québec literature, and with a single chapter on ‘English’ Canada parallel to this one” (217). In Atwood’s more recent *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature* (1995), the author confesses that she “[has] not dealt with works written in French,” in part due to “the political ambiguities involved” (11). Moreover, Northrop Frye, in his “Conclusion to the Literary History of Canada,” published in the now classic *The Bush Garden* (1971), notices that “Canada has two languages and two literatures, and every statement made in a book like [the Literary History of Canada] about ‘Canadian literature’ employs the figure of speech known as synecdoche, putting a part for the whole. Every such statement implies a parallel or contrasting statement about French-Canadian literature” (216-17). A similar view has also dominated literary discussions in French Canada, where Réjean Beaudoin observes that the change of appellation from “French-Canadian literature” to “Québécois literature” expresses French Canada’s strong resistance to its inclusion in an all-encompassing notion of “Canadian literature,” as well as an emphasis upon its difference (68). Pierre Nepveu’s *L’Écologie du réel: Mort et naissance de la littérature québécoise contemporaine* (1988) and Mary Jean Green’s article “The Quebec Novel Today: Multiple Perspectives” (1994) are examples of works which examine the literature produced in Quebec separately, and without including it into a larger “pan-Canadian” body of work.

However, this perception of French- and English-Canadian literatures as two distinct entities has begun to change in recent years and given way to studies where authors from both sides of the “divide” are discussed together. For example, *Studies on Canadian Literature: Introductory and Critical Essays* (1990), edited by Arnold E. Davidson, gathers essays on various aspects of English- and French-Canadian

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has proved a more accurate description of the socio-political realities” between English and French Canada (25).
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literatures, even though these are organised in two separate sections, with a distinct bibliographic guide for each. Marc Maufort and Franca Bellarsi’s *Reconfigurations: Canadian Literatures and Postcolonial Identities / Littératures canadiennes et identités postcoloniales* (2002) follows a similar structure, with, in addition, the inclusion of essays in French and in English, and of one essay dealing simultaneously with both Francophone and Anglophone authors. Marie Carrière’s *Writing in the Feminine in French and English Canada: A Question of Ethics* (2002) also examines a selection of French- and English-Canadian female writers without resorting to a linguistic or cultural divide. Carrière notices that “although there are notable (but too few) comparative studies of writing in the feminine in the form of articles and collected essays (which, individually, often deal with either one or the other cultural context [of French and English Canada]), a comparative study – full-fledged and volume-length – is timely and warranted” (4). Although this is not an exhaustive list, the works mentioned do give an illustration of the rarity of critical studies covering both English- and French-Canadian literatures.

Carrière’s study stands out in its perspective and yet, it has affinities with a well-known approach in Canadian literary criticism, “comparatism.” The latter has often triggered the suspicion of critics in both English and French Canada, for instance E.D. Blodgett, who points out in his *Configuration: Essays on the Canadian Literatures* (1982) that the comparative project often stems from the belief that “Canadian literatures” are “sisters” because issued from the same country, and from the concern that their distinct literary productions could end up developing two conflicting national identities. Blodgett criticises this attitude and comments that “a model that implies that the two literatures are related by reason of the fact that they are the literatures of one country […] is a political assumption that is not shared everywhere in the country” (7). In this respect, the plural form of the word “literatures” in his title refers to a multiplicity, and not binarity, of languages and cultures in Canada (7). Réjean Beaudoin, for his part, notes that Anglo-Canadian critics often attempt to find links between Anglo- and Franco-Canadian works, so as to emphasise the notion that Québécois authors belong, nevertheless, to a wider “Canadian literary imagination” (68).

The present study does not aim to carry out an unjustified rapprochement between the literatures of Canada and Quebec, or to
establish a homogenised vision of Canada’s literatures. Rather, I aim to explore the recurrence of patterns, motifs, and issues in the works of two twentieth-century Canadian female authors of distinct cultural and linguistic backgrounds: the Ontarian Margaret Atwood and the Québécoise Anne Hébert. The examination of these patterns, motifs, and issues brings to the fore the particularities, as well as the similarities, of each writer’s work. The notion of shared experience, rather than shared nationality, will be key to the critical discussion of these works, where issues of gender and cultural identity will constitute important points of focus. In addition, although Atwood and Hébert have achieved literary recognition in Canada and internationally, they are studied here on their own terms, and not as representatives of, respectively, English- and French-Canadian literatures. The observations made in relation to their work will therefore not necessarily be applicable to the whole body of Canadian writing.

In fact, this study focuses on one particular aspect of Atwood’s and Hébert’s poetic, dramatic, and novelistic production, namely, the central role they give to Canadian history and to actual Canadian historical figures. In this respect, I consider the ways in which each author attempts to “re-write” Canadian history, and to what degree each manages to create a specifically female historical space in which traditionally oppressed female figures are given an opportunity to make themselves heard. The research for this book has included the study of unpublished manuscripts, rare secondary material, audio tapes, video films, personal and archival documents, all linked to the writings of Atwood and Hébert. Access to these documents which have received little critical attention previously has permitted the development of an original interpretation of Atwood’s and Hébert’s works, and of a new reading of their relationship to Canadian and Québécois history.

Prior to this study, there have been few comparative analyses involving the works of Atwood and Hébert. Lorraine Weir’s article “‘Fauna of Mirrors’: The Poetry of Hébert and Atwood” (1979) compares the poetry of both authors and examines their recurrent use of the image of the “mirror” to convey the entrapment of the female self. Barbara Godard’s article “My (m)Other, My Self: Strategies for Subversion in Atwood and Hébert” (1983) explores Hébert’s *Kamouraska* (1970) and Atwood’s *Lady Oracle* (1976) to address the fragmentation of the female self and the multiplicity of female...
roles created by patriarchal discourse, emphasising all the while the subversive potential of that multiplicity. Georges Desmeules’s article “Anne Hébert et Margaret Atwood: Une seule et même solitude” (2000) uses Hugh MacLennan’s title to better counteract the claim that two distinct societies coexist in Canada. Desmeules shows how Canadian and Québécois literatures often meet around similar and essential issues: he gives the example of the critique of women’s status in men’s society as expressed in Hébert’s Les Enfants du sabbat (1975) and Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale (1985). These comparative studies all deal with works which will not receive detailed attention in this study, or offer a different critical approach, with the exception perhaps of Virginia Harger-Grinling and Tony Chadwick’s article “Anne Hébert’s Kamouraska and Margaret Atwood’s Alias Grace: Individuals in History” (2000), which points to the same complex interplay between notions of gender and history in Margaret Atwood’s and Anne Hébert’s works. Yet, the critics’ conclusion that in Kamouraska “one is no closer to understanding the motivations for [Elisabeth’s] actions,” as these motivations belong to the “secret, psychological” sphere of her experience (56), is questionable. This study offers a different reading of these texts, showing that the reasons behind Elisabeth’s actions are in fact vividly depicted in the novel, and that they are linked to the wider political and social contexts of the period. In turn, it will also be shown how in both novels the domain of the private does sustain an understanding of larger historical and political events. This introduction begins with a brief overview of the tropes and issues which have traditionally received critical attention in the writings of Margaret Atwood and Anne Hébert, before moving on to the tradition of the historical novel in English- and French-Canadian literatures, so as to better appreciate each author’s use of the genre. Finally, we will consider the body of work authored by female writers in Anglo- and French-Canadian literatures, in order to locate Atwood and Hébert’s writings in relation to that tradition.

Margaret Atwood

To date, Margaret Atwood has published fourteen novels, seven collections of short prose and short stories, and seventeen books of poetry. Her work has been very diverse, but some themes and preoccupations have been recurrent, such as a fascination with the
Canadian wilderness, a concern with women’s place in society, Canada’s postcolonial status, and finally, the importance of history in Canada’s process of nation formation. Many readings of Atwood’s work have focused on its use of the natural landscape, and on the ways in which it perceives Nature as a means of questioning and re-defining one’s sense of identity. Her poem sequence *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970) and her novel *Surfacing* (1972) have often been hailed as the best illustrations of this theme. The collection of short stories *Wilderness Tips* (1991) and more recently, to a certain degree, the novels *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and *The Year of the Flood* (2009), have offered revised perspectives of the role of the wilderness through their implied awareness of the author’s own role in promoting Canada’s landscape, and of the impact this has had on subsequent perceptions of that landscape. Atwood thus returns to her earlier topic with irony to present a vision of Nature informed by contemporary concerns with pollution and ecological disasters in *Wilderness Tips*, a vision which is then projected into a post-apocalyptic setting of bacterial warfare in *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*. Chapter 2 explores these themes in relation to *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* and examines the treatment of the effects of the Canadian wilderness on the consciousness of the nineteenth-century female pioneer in the sequence of poems.

Women’s social status – and gender power dynamics more generally – have also been concerns for Atwood in many of her works, including *The Edible Woman* (1969), *Lady Oracle*, *Life Before Man* (1979), *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *Alias Grace* (1996), and *The Blind Assassin* (2000). In all these novels, in one way or another, women’s place in society, and the ways in which issues of gender, class, and nationality condition the roles of individuals, are revealed. This is particularly visible in *The Edible Woman* and in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, but also in *Alias Grace*, which is studied in depth in Chapter 3. However, Atwood’s relationship to the Women’s Liberation Movement has not been one of simple endorsement, especially when it comes to what the author describes as feminist “obligations” to create “positive” female characters. Atwood raises this issue in an address she gave in 1994 and which is entitled “Spotty-Handed Villainesses: Problems of Female Bad Behaviour in the Creation of Literature.” She considers whether it is not “somehow unfeminist” today to depict “a woman behaving badly,” and comments that while the advent of Feminism
Introduction

has allowed “the expansion of the territory available to writers” and offered “a sharp-eyed examination of the way power works in gender relations, and the exposure of much of this as socially constructed,” it has also created restrictions on the choices of the feminist writer. “[Are] all heroines to be essentially spotless of soul – struggling against, fleeing from or done in by male oppression?” Atwood wonders, or “in another word – [are] men to get all the juicy parts?” (“Spotty-Handed”). Atwood criticises these restrictions, and links them to those imposed by patriarchy upon female artists in the past. She adds that writers need to push against the notion that only men can be “villains” and women victims:

female bad characters can also act as keys to doors we need to open […]. They can be explorations of moral freedom – because everyone’s choices are limited, and women’s choices have been more limited than men’s, but that doesn’t mean women can’t make choices. (“Spotty-Handed”)

According to Atwood, “women have more to them than virtue. They are fully dimensional human beings; they too have subterranean depths” (“Spotty-Handed”). She concludes that “[e]vil women are necessary in story traditions […], they exist in life, so why shouldn’t they exist in literature?” (“Spotty-Handed”). The use of “negative” female characters to examine gender role restrictions is particularly useful in the study of Alias Grace, but also in the poems “Marrying the Hangman” and “Half-Hanged Mary,” which are discussed in Chapter 2. Atwood similarly uses “negative” female characters, as well as negative representations of the relationships between women, in her novels Cat’s Eye (1988) and The Robber Bride (1993). The description of the cruel bullying carried out between little girls in the former, and the manipulating, ruthless character of Zenia in the latter, both promote the idea that new female role models are needed, ones that acknowledge women’s flaws and at the same time reject unattainable ideals of feminine perfection.

Canada’s postcolonial status is another important concern in Atwood’s work, one which greatly affected her during her formative years. Her contribution to the establishment of a national consciousness for Canada is visible in her attempt to address the specificity of the Canadian experience and the importance of the “local” (in terms of place and people) in the definition of that experience. This has
also meant resisting the cultural hierarchy in place at the time and its dismissal of the idea of “Canadian literature.” For these reasons, Atwood has often been seen as a nationalist author, and she has spoken on numerous occasions in the defence of Canada’s values in the face of a “post-imperialist” Great Britain and “neo-imperialist” America. She explores these issues in Surfacing, The Handmaid’s Tale, Alias Grace, and to a certain extent, Oryx and Crake. Atwood’s work also highlights the importance of history in the development of Canada’s national identity. In The Handmaid’s Tale, she examines the relationship between history and fiction through notions of dystopia and memory. The narrative quality of history, and the degree of manipulation involved in the history writing process, are vividly depicted throughout the novel, especially in the “Historical Notes” at the end of the narrative, where historians end up questioning the authenticity of the manuscript entitled “The Handmaid’s Tale” (that is, the very narrative of the novel). In The Robber Bride, military historian Tony Fremont is writing a study entitled Deadly Vestments: A History of Inept Military Couture, which examines, quite seriously, the use of unsuitable military uniforms and their effects on the outcome of conflicts. Tony mentions, for instance, the many British soldiers who “died needlessly because of the redness of their uniforms,” as well as the various types of “fly-front fastenings” which “have all played their part in military history through the ages” (The Robber Bride 24). Tony adds that war historians “have tended to concentrate on the kings and the generals, on their decisions, on their strategy, and have overlooked more lowly, but equally important factors, which can, and have, put the actual soldiers – those on the sharp edge – at risk” (24). Her approach is in keeping with the notion of “limited identities” which will be developed in the next chapter, and which focuses on the importance of small-scale details in the understanding of larger historical events. This approach is also developed by Atwood in Alias Grace, and in some of the other works selected in this study. Although The Handmaid’s Tale and The Robber Bride deal with notions of history, they are not discussed in depth in this study as they do not revolve around actual historical figures.

On the issue of the “divide” between French- and English-Canadian literatures, it is relevant to mention Atwood’s book Two Solicitudes: Conversations (1998), co-written with Québécois writer
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Victor-Lévy Beaulieu, and which consists of the lengthy conversations both authors had at the occasion of two distinct interviews in 1995. The book deals with many topics of mutual interest to both writers, such as writing, the importance of belonging to a national territory, and the future of Canada and Quebec. This exchange between Atwood and Beaulieu charts their attempt to offer a bridge between Québécois and Canadian literature; this is especially visible in their choice of title, a play on Hugh MacLennan’s observation about Canada’s “two solitudes.” As Atwood observes, “[i]n our conversations, I believe we acknowledged the solitudes. We also acknowledged the greeting. If there were more solicitude, on both sides of the great linguistic divide, we would all be a great deal better off” (Atwood and Beaulieu xii).

Anne Hébert

Anne Hébert is the author of ten novels, five plays, five books of poetry, and one collection of short stories. Some of the recurrent themes and preoccupations in her work have been the tropes of exile and social alienation, the development of an écriture féminine, the representation of “negative” female characters as a source of female empowerment, the rejection of patriarchal structures, but also of colonial cultural domination, and the role of the past in the establishment of a Québécois identity. Much critical attention has been given to the themes of isolation, estrangement, and even madness in Hébert’s work, themes which are often related to women’s oppressed social status, as with the character of Catherine in the novel Les Chambres de bois (1958), but also to men’s, as with François in the short story “Le Torrent” (1950). “Le Torrent” is based on a fait divers and narrates François’s rebellion against the oppressing traditionalist values of his mother, who wants him to study at the seminary in order to become a priest. As with many of Hébert’s works, the conflict ends in tragedy: François kills his mother to achieve freedom in an act which has been read as French Canada’s symbolic killing of the cultural tradition of its mother country, in order to allow a distinctly French-Canadian creative vision to emerge.² Les Fous de Bassan (1982) also seems to have been inspired

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by a true story, that of the disappearance and murder of two young women from an isolated Protestant community of the Gaspé Peninsula. Alienation and insanity are the main themes examined in relation to the novel, which depicts an oppressive society closed in on itself, and the disabling effect this has on its members, male and female alike. The reclusive community of Les Fous de Bassan has also been seen to represent French Canada during the period of the survivance, when it strove to remain faithful to the cult of its mother country in all possible ways, and refused the potential for change available on the continent.

Issues relating to women’s oppression and victimisation in the context of a patriarchal society have also been concerns in Hébert’s work. Yet, where critical readings of Atwood’s work have highlighted her focus on the economic, political, and social factors of that victimisation, studies of Hébert’s writing emphasise the importance she places on the female body, both as the cause of that victimisation and as a source of power to rebel against it. In Les Fous de Bassan for instance, the (murdered) female body is associated with the natural elements, the sea in particular, through which it is linked to the powerful figure of the “mother” (as evoked by the homonyms “mer” and “mère” in French), and is somehow able to transcend its own death. These discrepancies between the approaches adopted by each author may have to do with the differences between Anglo-American Feminism, which has traditionally been concerned with questions of socio-political class, and French/Francophone Feminism, which has been more readily influenced by psychoanalytic theory and the idea of language as a gendered means of expression. Each trend of the movement could thus have had a different impact on the writings of each author, but I will question whether the boundary between these types of feminist thought can be so conveniently drawn in the case of Atwood and Hébert.

The use of “negative” female stereotypes is also a recurrent trope in Hébert’s work, for instance in her novels Kamouraska, Les Enfants du sabbat, Héloïse (1980), and L’Enfant chargé de songes (1992). This depiction of female “bad” behaviour sometimes develops images associated with the Gothic, as with the character of Héloïse, a female vampire, and in Les Enfants du sabbat that of Sister Julie de la Trinité, a nun turned witch in a convent in 1940s Quebec. Sister Julie is representative of the importance of the female body in the
Introduction

revolt against oppressive gender roles: she uses her femininity in the practice of witchcraft, and powerfully challenges the religious dictates which read the female body as “sinful” temptation and advocate its effacement. Women’s sexuality is an important issue in these novels, where sexual freedom becomes a struggle, sometimes tied in with murder, as with Elisabeth in Kamouraska, or Héloïse in the novel of the same name. The latter heroine, through the erotic suggestion of the vampire’s kiss, seduces and kills her victims chosen randomly on the Paris underground, as so many fleeting sexual encounters.

In the novels Kamouraska and Le Premier Jardin (1988), as well as in the plays La Cage and L’Île de la Demoiselle (1990), Hébert addresses issues linked to Quebec’s history and cultural identity. She highlights the colonial cultural domination which, in the words of Lord Durham’s 1839 Report, described French Canada as “a people with no history and no literature” (Lacoursière, Provencher, and Vaugeois 252). As is illustrated in subsequent chapters, Hébert fights against this notion by asserting the importance of Quebec’s local past, places and people, an approach which is in keeping with that of the “limited identities.” Finally, it is important to note in the present context that Atwood recognises Hébert as one of the female poets having marked her and influenced her poetical consciousness during her formative years; Atwood cites Hébert as one of “the women whose work I read and admire” (qtd. in Hammond 101). The next section outlines the tradition of the historical novel in Canadian writing, and the importance of history in the fiction recently produced in Canada.

Historical Fiction in Contemporary French- and English-Canadian Writing

Poet Patrick Lane once remarked that for “the generation of writers who came of age during the post-War years Canadian history became an obsession. Their desire was to write it into existence” (59). In recent years, history has played an important role in Canadian literature, and has been a source of inspiration for many of Canada’s most prominent novelists: Timothy Findley, Rudy Wiebe, Robertson Davies, Anne

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Michaels, Alice Munro, Madeleine Ouellette-Michalska, Antonine Maillet, George Bowering, Daphne Marlatt, Carol Shields, Rachel Leclerc, Jane Urquhart, and of course, Margaret Atwood and Anne Hébert have all used history in their writings. In a lecture entitled “In Search of Alias Grace: On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction,” Atwood attributed this surge to the fact that Canadian writers “[were] more confident about [themselves]” and that they were “now allowed to find [themselves] more interesting than [they] once did” (1510-11). She added that “[i]n this, we are part of a worldwide movement that has found writers and readers, especially in ex-colonies, turning back toward their own roots” (1511), and “by taking a long hard look backwards, we place ourselves” in the present (1512). This is true also in relation to the recent rise of the historical novel in French-Canadian literature, a trend which, according to Nancy Desjardins, is motivated by a search for one’s origins and sense of self (46). In the case of historical fiction authored by women, Desjardins notes that the use of a historical setting is a means of giving voice to history’s female protagonists, a fact which is highlighted in subsequent chapters. Desjardins also underlines the distinct ways in which Québécois authors have attempted to renew the writing of historical fiction, for instance by mingling innovation with tradition, or with the technique of telling a “story-within-a-story,” by which different time periods, and different stories, are treated simultaneously (47). The latter technique in particular creates distance, polysemy, and irony through the establishment of a double movement between the narrative in the present and the narrative in the past. As a result, contemporary Québécois authors have been able to return to the genre of historical fiction and generate new thinking on both history and historiography (47).

Similarly, Herb Wyile, Jennifer Andrews, and Robert Viau, the editors of a special issue of Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne dedicated to Canadian historical fiction, observe in their introduction that “[i]n Canada, historical fiction explores the fundamental aspects of both Canadian history, specifically, and the writing of history, more generally” (4). They add that Canadian historical fiction has been concerned not only with the politics of historical representation, addressing “some of the darker corners of Canadian history” and focusing on “characters quite different from the usual leaders of the historical pageant,” but also with drawing “attention
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to the mechanics of historical representation – the conventions and textual devices that both permit and complicate the representation of pastness” (4). This double concern is visible in the works examined in this study, both in the form of a focus on unknown and forgotten characters from Canada’s past, and in that of a probing into the very nature of history writing. In this context, Linda Hutcheon’s notion of “historiographic metafiction,” which she develops in The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction (1988), is useful to my analysis. “Historiographic metafiction” is defined by the increasing self-consciousness of contemporary Canadian historical fiction and by the political strategies which these writings carry. Hutcheon explains that to “write either history or historical fiction is equally to raise the question of power and control,” as “it is the story of the victors that usually gets told” (72). This concept shares similarities with Janet M. Paterson’s notion of the “postmodern historical novel” in French-Canadian writing, a type of fiction where thinking about history, thinking oneself into history, or re-thinking history are recurrent themes (54).

Furthermore, in the context of postcolonial Canada, and in that of “colonised” Quebec, I will consider the extent to which the writing of historical fiction may serve a distinct political purpose: as Atwood explained earlier, the feeling of finding oneself “interesting” is also the feeling of overcoming the weight of colonial cultural hegemony which dictated that, previously, one was not “interesting.” Through the celebration of their local values, Canadian and Québécois writers are pushing against the notion of what has been traditionally accepted as aesthetically worthy. Such traditions have been established in the past, and it could be argued that these writers’ attempts at re-visiting and re-interpreting history have to do with their will to assert a renewed sense of self, and worth, in the present. The particular political and cultural status of Canada as a postcolonial nation can thus be linked to this resurgence of historical fiction. The story of a nation’s past is indeed the tool with which it can define its future, and therefore a source of empowerment in its process of nation formation. Lane has observed that through the writing of historical fiction, and “[a]s they explored their imagined place [Canadian novelists] created a new image of Canada. This remaking or reimagining transformed the official record, the facts as they were known. To these writers history

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had to be revised” (59). This notion of “reimagining” history has had predominance in recent critical discussions both in Quebec and in the rest of Canada, where authors have expressed the need to return to key episodes of the past in order to examine the ways in which historical narratives had been formed then. This has been visible in Quebec especially, for instance in the numerous re-readings of the writings of the period of the Quiet Revolution. In this context, the concept of “historical re-writing” which is employed in subsequent chapters refers precisely to this notion of historical re-interpretation, as it has been used by women writers, in the purpose of addressing women’s “absence” from historical records.

Women’s Writing in English and French Canada

Margaret Atwood once observed that when studying English-Canadian literature, one could not ignore the female writers, for as far back as the nineteenth century, with Susanna Moodie, Catherine Parr Traill, Anne Langton and Anna Jameson, and up until the present day, women writers had always been relatively significant in Canada. Atwood ascribed this to the fact that English Canada was settled essentially in the nineteenth century, in the age of the letter and the journal, traditionally seen as female forms of writing, and at a time when many women were already literate. The four female writers cited above were gentlewomen whose class, according to Atwood, gave them “a literary edge over those of their less well-educated fellow citizens who happened to be male.” Atwood added that a similar situation was found in French Canada, where some of the first writings were authored by nuns who had come to convert the Native population.

With the advent of the Women’s Liberation Movement in the 1970s, female writers in Quebec began to express radical political thinking through literary experimentation. That period saw the rise of a particular type of women’s writing, one which sought to renew the way women were perceived and proposed new strategies in

4. Margaret Atwood, “Susanna Moodie,” draft version of the introduction Atwood wrote for Susanna Moodie’s Roughing It in the Bush (London: Virago, 1986). This draft is filed in the Margaret Atwood Papers, at the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto, which holds most of Margaret Atwood’s manuscripts, as well as her entire collected works, both published and unpublished.
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terms of form. As a result, experimentalism became the norm in the work of Québécois female authors, as seen in the writings of Louky Bersianik, Nicole Brossard, Madeleine Gagnon, and Denise Boucher. In the 1980s, however, and after the feminist movement had reached its peak, Québécois women’s writing entered a new phase, which Lori Saint-Martin described as métaféminisme. Rejecting the intense experimentalism of the 1970s, the new trend developed objectives which differed from the overt political agenda of feminist writing (such as abolishing patriarchy and developing a feminine culture) (Saint-Martin, “Métaféminisme” 81). Despite agreeing with this feminist political agenda, métaféminisme took distance from the movement, as its authors believed their creativity should not be restricted to the defence of a specific cause (Saint-Martin, “Métaféminisme” 81). This particular relationship with Feminism has been established earlier in relation to Atwood’s work and her belief in the importance of being able to create “bad,” as well as good, female characters in literature; as will be seen, a similar preoccupation is also present in Hébert’s writings.

In English Canada, the experimental literary styles which were predominant in 1970s Quebec were still rare at the time, and became more widespread only in the late 1970s and 1980s, with the writings of Phyllis Webb, Daphne Marlatt, Lola Lemire Tostevin, and Di Brandt. Hutcheon observes that, differently “from Québec women writers […] with their more overtly radical challenges, Canadian women writing in English […] use a disguised form of subversion that implicitly questions prevailing authority” (“The Canadian Postmodern: Fiction” 22). Hutcheon adds that these women writers are not more conservative or traditionally realist than their fellow Québécois writers, but rather that “one can only assume and challenge selfhood […] or subjectivity when one has attained it,” therefore if “women have not yet been allowed access to (male-defined) subjectivity, then it is very difficult for them to contest it” (21). She points out that recently there has been a critical emphasis upon “the relation between the national search for a Canadian cultural identity and the feminist seeking for a distinctive female identity in terms of the paradoxical (and postmodern) recognition and contesting of colonial positions with respect to the power of dominating cultures” (22). Chapter 2 illustrates how Atwood’s work is a good example of this, in particular her poem sequence The Journals of Susanna Moodie, where the experiences of
the nineteenth-century pioneer woman are used to define Canada’s national consciousness in the twentieth century.

One of the ways in which Canadian female writers have operated this double recognition and contesting, according to Hutcheon, has been through the use of ironic intertextuality, or parody, as a means of both marking “a rupture” with, or at least a subversion or critique of, the text parodied,” and at the same time showing “a kind of interpretative continuity” (Splitting Images 96; emphasis in original). Hutcheon notes that the latter is “most often true when it is women’s work that is cited, or even parodied, by women artists,” as in Atwood’s poem cycle which, once again, takes inspiration from Susanna Moodie’s writings (96). Hutcheon remarks that these different uses of irony have allowed feminist artists to re-examine the politics of (gender) representation; in the case of Atwood and Hébert, I consider as well the challenge to dominant patriarchal and colonial ideologies permitted by both writers’ use of irony. Hutcheon concludes that fiction authored by contemporary Canadian women writers has brought about a “radical critique of totalizing systems and so-called universal Truths,” a critique which is “enacted in the literature itself” (“Shape Shifters” 220).

This overview of women’s writing in English and French Canada sets up the cultural context within which Atwood and Hébert have produced their works. Marie Carrière’s observation that, with “the growing presence and development of Feminism through experimental writing in both English and French, we can therefore conclude that there has been less of a gap between the two cultures […]”, if not in terms of an entire literary past, at least in terms of certain literary moments, provides a convenient framework for the critical discussion at hand (14). Although the works under study do not belong to the genre of experimental feminist writing, the notion of rapprochement in terms of “literary moments,” and in terms of a similarity of concerns expressed, is pertinent for the present project. This possible rapprochement, and these “literary moments,” may allow us to assess whether the “two solitudes” mentioned earlier can in fact become “two solicitudes.”

Because history and historiography are recurrent concerns in the works selected, this study begins with a brief historical outline of Canada and Quebec, and an overview of the recent historiographical debates in both, including a definition of the notion of “limited identities”; this is the object of Chapter 1. Chapter 2 examines Margaret
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Atwood’s 1970 poem cycle The Journals of Susanna Moodie, which focuses on the writings of the nineteenth-century female settler, and explores the themes of alienation, displacement, and loss associated with her pioneering experience in Canada. Atwood would later re-visit the work of Susanna Moodie, as will be shown in Grace, her unpublished play. Also studied in Chapter 2 are two poems and a short story in which Atwood uses the life stories of other female characters from the past. Chapter 3 is dedicated to Atwood’s 1996 novel Alias Grace and concentrates on the ways in which the narrative adopts a “limited identities” approach to the life story of a nineteenth-century handmaid accused of murder. The discussion also shows how this novel constitutes yet another re-visiting of Moodie’s writings on Atwood’s part. Chapter 4 is concerned with the examination of Anne Hébert’s 1970 novel Kamouraska, in which notions of official historical narrative and private past are challenged. The similarities of plot and thematic concerns between Alias Grace and Kamouraska provide here a useful link in the study of both authors. Chapter 5 explores Hébert’s two plays La Cage and L’Île de la Demoiselle, published jointly in 1990, and considers the author’s attempt to re-interpret Quebec’s history and rehabilitate some of its characters. Finally, Chapter 6 examines Hébert’s 1988 novel Le Premier Jardin to assess the ways in which the use of artistic creativity enables the heroine to establish a Québécois “herstory.”
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Focusing on two twentieth-century Canadian female authors of distinct cultural and linguistic backgrounds, this book addresses the central role they each give to Canadian history. By assessing the ways in which each author attempts to “re-write” Canadian history in order to create a specifically female historical space, Elodie Rousselot shows that both Margaret Atwood and Anne Hébert have successfully given a voice to traditionally oppressed female figures.

Elodie Rousselot’s analysis focuses on Margaret Atwood’s *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* and *Grace*, an unpublished play, as well as on her novel *Alias Grace*. She also examines Anne Hébert’s novel, *Kamouraska*, and two plays: *La Cage* and *L’Île de la Demoiselle*. Finally, Anne Hébert’s success in establishing a Quebecois “herstory” is assessed through the analysis of her 1988 novel *Le Premier Jardin*.

Dr Elodie Rousselot is a Senior Lecturer in English Literature at the School of Social, Historical and Literary Studies of the University of Portsmouth. Her monograph *Re-Writing Women into Canadian History: Margaret Atwood and Anne Hébert* has been awarded the Prix scientifique Anne-Hébert by the Centre Anne-Hébert, University of Sherbrooke, Québec, Canada.